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## Multicultural Society in Digital Comic *304<sup>th</sup> Study Room* (Session 1)

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### Abstract;

Digital comic or *webtoon* has its own way of delivering messages to readers, namely using visual and verbal language. Comic can also portray social condition or especially multicultural society where the comic is written. Taking *304<sup>th</sup> Study Room (Session 1)* comic as its object, this study aimed to assess the representation of cultural diversity in the webtoon so it knows what the ideology delivered by the webtoonist. This research is a qualitative research. The theoretical basis in this study is the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes which is seen through the level of its meaning. The results of this study show that through semiotic Roland Barthes the diversity of cultures in the *webtoon 304<sup>th</sup> Study Room (season 1)* is represented through characters backgrounds of different ethnicity or race and beliefs and characters interaction in the webtoon. The webtoonist wants to convey the ideal pluralistic society so that broadly speaking, the myths in the webtoon are cultural diversity, multicultural society. So it can be said that digital comic or webtoon play an important role as a products of popular culture to instilling or perpetuating ideology, especially Pancasila multicultural society in Indonesia.

**Keyword:** Digital Comic, Multicultural Society, Semiotic, *304<sup>th</sup> Study Room*

### Abstrak

Komik digital atau *webtoon* mempunyai cara tersendiri dalam menyampaikan pesan kepada pembaca, yaitu menggunakan bahasa visual dan verbal. Komik juga dapat menggambarkan kondisi sosial atau khususnya masyarakat multikultur dimana komik itu lahir. Menggunakan *webtoon 304<sup>th</sup> Study Room (Session 1)* sebagai objek penelitian, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk 1) mengkaji representasi keanekaragaman budaya dalam *webtoon 304<sup>th</sup> Study Room* sehingga mengetahui apa ideologi yang ingin disampaikan oleh webtoonist. Penelitian ini adalah penelitian kualitatif. Dasar teoritis dalam penelitian ini adalah teori semiotika Roland Barthes yang dilihat melalui tingkat maknanya. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa melalui semiotika Roland Barthes keragaman budaya dalam *webtoon 304<sup>th</sup> Study Room (Session 1)* direpresentasikan oleh latar belakang karakter yang berbeda etnis/ras dan kepercayaan serta interaksi tokoh-tokoh dalam *webtoon* tersebut. Webtoonist ingin menyampaikan masyarakat majemuk yang ideal sehingga secara garis besar mitos dalam *webtoon* tersebut adalah keragaman budaya, masyarakat multikultural. Sehingga dapat dikatakan bahwa komik digital atau *webtoon* berperan penting sebagai produk budaya populer untuk menanamkan atau melanggengkan ideologi, khususnya masyarakat multikultural Pancasila di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: *304<sup>th</sup> Study Room*, Analisis Wacana Kritis, Komik Digital, Masyarakat multikultural, Semiotik

## Introduction

Indonesia is a diverse country which house staggering 13,00 island along with more than 250 million inhabitants<sup>1</sup>. Numerous ethnic groups, languages and religions reside in Indonesia which in turn create multicultural society within its boundaries. This diversity has a significant potency whether as a force or unforce for country's development. As a pluralistic country, Indonesia is also inherited this issue. the vast socio-cultural and geographical features add its complexity<sup>2</sup>. Many conflicts occurred in Indonesia triggered by cultural diversity misunderstanding and intolerance such as Sampit tragedy, Sunni-Syiah conflict, and recently blasphemy case of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama publicly known as Ahok.

The culturally diverse condition in Indonesia demands multiculturalism understanding to form tolerance. Sparringa highlights the role of multiculturalism as a facilitator of cultural understanding and dichotomous tensions reduction, by offering dual-reality and multi-reality perspectives<sup>3</sup>. It is in line with Indonesia's national spirit toward vision of multi-ethnic coexistence known as the principle of unity in diversity (*Bhineka Tunggal Ika*). Therefore, it becomes prominent to continuously raise awareness of multiculturalism such as tolerance, recognition, and appreciation of cultural differences.

Mass media appears as one of effective measure to raise cultural awareness. Quail found that mass media both printed and electronic have a significant contribution in culture development<sup>4</sup>. Recently, some mass media opt theme of cultural diversity and importance of tolerance which digital comic or webtoon comes out as the popular one. Comics have their own way of conveying information effectively and efficiently through their own language. As cultural artefact, comic provides opportunities for expression both verbally and visually which remains within the boundaries of communication<sup>5</sup>. Comic studies are important because it can read a social condition of Indonesian society in accordance with the context of the era<sup>6</sup>.

Comic can be analysed based on its contains; aesthetically, visual aspect and the ideological aspect through cultural studies theory. Bonneff in Rimaya<sup>7</sup> says that comic can deliver author's view of the reality of life in accordance with the surrounding situation. This fact implies that comics are born from cultural situation. Additionally, comic inherits norms and values which influenced by social system upon its creative process<sup>8</sup>.

Following the advancement of technology comics are produced in digital format known as webtoon. 304<sup>th</sup> Study Room (season 1) tells a story of friendship form different cultural backgrounds. The storyline also touched on the May 1998 riots in which racial-related conflict occurred. As a Tionghoa's descendant the author Felicia Huang infused some Tionghoa's common discriminations that she had experienced. Although, 304<sup>th</sup> Study

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<sup>1</sup> Setiawan, Psuedo Demokrasi Dalam Ranah Koalisi Partai Politik di Indonesia, *Jurnal Recharts*, Vol. 5 No. 2 tahun 2017. Baca juga dalam Yakin, *Pendidikan Multikultural: Cross- Cultural Understanding Untuk Demokrasi* (Yogyakarta: Pilar Media, 2005). 225.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 230.

<sup>3</sup> Sparringa, *Multikulturalisme Indonesia; Jawaban Terhadap Kemajemukan* (Surabaya: Komunitas Indonesia Untuk Demokrasi, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Quail, *Teori Komunikasi Massa* (Jakarta: Erlangga, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Lubis, *Komik Fotokopian Indonesia 1998-2001*, *Journal of Visual Art and Design*, 2009, 57-58.

<sup>6</sup> Ajidarma, *Panji Tengkorak; Kebudayaan Dalam Perbbincangan* (Jakarta: KPG, 2011). 205.

<sup>7</sup> Rimaya, *Mencari Identitas Komik Indonesia (Studi Komik Independen/Foto Kopi Indonesia)* (Jakarta: Universitas Indonesia, 2014), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ajidarma, .210.

Room intends to promote Indonesia's diversity but authors could not avoid bias. It can be seen as the author creates Chinese ethnic character as the main role.

This study wants to examine the representation of cultural diversity in the 304th Study Room (season 1) webtoon through Barthes' semiotic level of meaning and explore webtoonist's ideological struggle of the 304th Study Room (season 1).

### **Conceptual Basis (Multicultural Society)**

Multicultural is another word of how to describe plurality of cultures. Multicultural society is a continuation of a pluralistic society. If a plural society is something that exists and is real then a multicultural society is a society that adheres to values, behaves, feels, behaves, and acts multiculturally. Will Kymlicka is a philosopher from Canada, whose book has become a great reference for multiculturalism, namely the Multicultural Citizenship: the Liberal Theory of Minority Rights. Kurniasari<sup>9</sup> says that Pancasila values are in line with multiculturalism. That is reasonable because actually multiculturalism has been used by the founders of the Indonesian nation to design the culture of the Indonesian nation<sup>10</sup>.

### **Comic**

Comic according to Scott McCloud "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an esthetic response in the viewer"<sup>11</sup>. Masdiono clarified the comic component as follows; a. panel is a box that limits the picture in a scene. b. word balloon is visual forms of balloon in which there are words. c. Narrative is a dialog box that explains time, place and situation. d. Icon is all kinds of pictures that represent someone, an object, a place or idea e. The sound effect is to explain a situation such as when there is a lightning DHUAARR. Webtoon is a digital comic that can be accessed in web and webtoon applications. Webtoon is one of the products of popular culture whose emergence is a response to the sophistication of the world of technology and communication.

### **Theoretical Concept**

Roland Barthes's semiotic is composed of levels of language systems. There are two levels of language systems according to Barthes, namely the first level is language as an object commonly called denotation and the second which is commonly called methasa or connotation is also commonly called mythology. Significance of the first stage or denotation, production of meaning only stops at the order that describes the relationship between signified and signifier in the sign, as well as between signs and references in reality without containing additional meaning. In denotation the meaning of the sign is only literal. In the significance of the second stage or connotative level, language is a sign system that contains signified and signifier The connotation signifier is general, global and scattered, the sign stands for an idea, expression, feeling and can also be called an ideological fragment. The meaning at this level is very close to culture, history and knowledge<sup>12</sup>.

### **Method**

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<sup>9</sup> Kurniasari, *Multikulturalisme Pancasila Dalam Film Indonesia* (Surabaya: Universitas Airlangga, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Suraplan, Menuju Masyarakat Indonesia Yang Multikultural, *Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia*, 2002, 98-105.

<sup>11</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comic; The Invisible Art* (Wisconsin: Kitchensin Press, 1993), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Barthers, *Elements of Semiology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 91-92.

This study employs a qualitative design. There are two data sources in this study. The first data source is a digital comic 304th Study Room (season 1) written by Felicia Huang. The secondary data sources are articles which contain information about digital comic and situations of Indonesian society and also author histories and experiences. There are three steps taken in conducting this research. The first step is to read the story of the digital comic 304th Study Room (season 1). This is a picture, illustration which portray the description of the social structure of society, the known characters, and the main issue (topic) of the story. The next step, examine the findings in the first step into the two levels of the meaning of Barthes' semiotics. Finally, from the two levels of meaning, the myths will be found so that the ideology that the weboonist want to convey can be found.

## Discussion

### Representation of Multicultural Society in Webtoon 304th Study Room (season 1)

In Webtoon 304 Study Room (season 1) there is some diversity that researchers have found, first raising diversity from the background of characters of different ethnic or racial backgrounds, and the second being different beliefs or religions.

#### 1. Dirga Mahesa Wijaya

The first character is Dirga Mahesa Wijaya, a Chinese descent. He has a mandarin name Huang Jun Jian. Dirga's figure is a handsome, narrow-eyed man who is handsome like a Korean boy band. Dirga is ranked first in the Riau Province OSN.



Picture.1 Dirga Mahesa Wijaya or Huang Jun Jian



Gambar. 2 Kim Jee-woon (Right) dan Kim Hyun Joong

If seen in the denotative level or the actual meaning of 1 in both panels, Dirga's figure who has an oriental face above looks like a Korean actor or boyband. Compare that with figure 2 which are Kim Jee-woon boyband 'JYJ' and an actor as well as Kim Hyun Joong an actor and boyband "SS501". They have white faces, eyes that tend to be slanted because they usually do not have eye folds (typical of East Asian eyes), thin cheeks so that the chin looks pointed, tall and bangs hairstyles. In a dialogue balloon, Dirga introduced himself using his Indonesian name.

In the connotative level, Dirga is the representative of the webtoonist as a Chinese descendant in the five OSN participants. Felicia is a Chinese descendant who has participated in the OSN. Felicia and Dirga both have the Huang clan. Felicia is biased by choosing Dirga as the number one in the OSN. The myth at the connotative level is, first, that Chinese have a handsome face, smart but marginalized. Second, the selection of Dirga as the main character by gaining the first rank is a form of confirmation that the Chinese are scientific smart.

## 2. Desyca Taniadi

Second character is Desyca Taniadi that ranked fifth in the OSN physics selection



Picture. 3 Desyca Taniadi

In the denotative meaning of the picture Desyca is a female figure who seems to be tomboyish, with a simple style of dress using a T-shirt and pants and attaching a jacket to her stomach (right panel). On the left panel of the Desyca stretching his legs while supporting his chin, such a position does not seem feminine. Writing in the left panel, in the dialogue balloon it is written that he had no 70% absenteeism so she can be expelled from school. Desyca likes to skip school because she thinks what school is for if she would only be a wife as her mother planted her. While in the picture panel on the right, Desyca is introducing herself in the class of the OSN physics team, Riau.

The connotative meaning in the two panels above is that Desyca is a character that overhauls stereotypes. There is a stereotype that science is in physics and mathematics for men because men use logic more than women who tend to use feelings. At least, Decyca is the woman who participated in OSN in physics. Desyca is described as having high dreams and rebelling when she disagreed with the thoughts that cornered herself as a woman. Desyca figures are also shown to be less feminine and simple without focusing too much on her appearance. The myth is that Desyca is a picture of a woman who can be equal to men. Without being too concerned with appearance, having high dreams and not willing to follow the thoughts that curb her.

## 3. Reihan Rizaski

The third character, Reihan Rizaski, is ranked third in the OSN physics selection.



Picture.4 Reihan Rizaski

The denotative meaning of the comic panel above shows Reihan as a teenager who has white skin, long red hair tied partially to the back and has hazel colored eyes (right panel). In a black dialogue balloon it is Desyca's opinion of Reihan. According to Desyca Reihan does not seem like a schoolboy who is exemplary by his outward appearance. Reihan is introducing himself to the Desyca as a team in the field of physics while holding out his hand to shake hands. While the panel in the middle and left is a childhood of Reihan with his mother, father, brother and sister. When Reihan was a child, he had a short, light brown booty, speckled skin and had amber yellow eyes from childhood

At the level of connotation, the comic image above can be said that do not judge people from their appearance. Reihan whose appearance is not neat with his long red hair is a genius who follows OSN and has the highest IQ in his class. He also has a friendly attitude, it is seen when he introduced himself first to the Desyca while taking shaking hands. In addition, the character Reihan also wants to get rid of the stereotype, that the ethnic appearance of Malay always has black eyes and black hair.

Researchers found several myths. The first is the existence of a mixed culture. Reihan, a native of Malays, has a face like "Caucasians". Reihan has a light brown, speckled skin and has amber yellow eyes. This physical characteristic is not possessed by an Indonesian native unless there is a chromosomal abnormality or a derivative from above. Historically, Indonesia is once invaded by Europeans. Reihan is a mixture of "faces" of Europe and Indonesia. The second is the purpose of trying to alienate the local.

#### 4. Benedict E. Johansson

The next character is Benedict E. Johansson who is a Dutchman who already has Indonesian citizenship and a Caucasian who likes to use Javanese "medok". Benedict alias Bejo is ranked fourth in the selection of physics at OSN at Riau Province.



Picture.5 Benedict E. Johansson



The denotative meaning of the comic panel above from the right is Benedict who has white, tall, dashing, blonde hair with blue eyes. Benedict is introducing himself to the Desyca by asking her to call him "mas bejo" with his Caucasian face. While the panel in the middle wearing a shirt that reads "not invader, I love Indonesia" by wearing batik shorts, a red and white flag picture on his temple and tie the colors of the Indonesian flag on his head. Finally, in the left panel Bejo is chatting with Desyca, in the panel it shows that Bejo uses a red and white picture; Indonesian flag as a profile photo.

The meaning of the connotation is that although Bejo has a European face, he loves Indonesia very much. Besides loving Indonesia, specifically Bejo liked the local culture of "Javanese" language, it is seen he asked himself to be called "mas" which means brother in Indonesian. Bejo is a picture of "foreigners" who love Indonesia more than those who are Indonesian.

Researchers found several myths. The first is the existence of a mixed culture. Bejo who has a European face and he is not native Indonesian but loves Indonesia and the Javanese language. It is a mixture of "faces" of Europe and Indonesia. The second is the purpose of locating foreigners.

#### 5. Arjuna Wira Atmadja

The fifth character, Arjuna Wira Atmadja, is of Malay descent. He is ranked second in the selection of OSN physics at Riau Province and has received an international science Olympiad gold medal in the field of IT and mathematics.



Picture.6 Arjuna Wira Atmadja

The denotative meaning of the panel above from the right is Juna who is lying while playing Japanese games, it looks like there is a word *baka* which means stupid in Japanese and there is a picture of Loli two pigtails, Juna's favorite in the game. The left comic panel is Desyca and Dirga who bet to win the OSN and in the same picture there are Bejo, Raihan and Juna. Juna looks the shortest and can't get out of her cellphone. Juna uses a hat that looks like a cat, uses a shirt covered in a jacket and shorts. Juna's appearance looks more like a child than others, even though Juna is the oldest participant in the physics team. The connotative meaning of the panels above is that Juna looks childish especially Arjuna has the shortest body than the others. With the wearing style that Juna wears, he looks like an elementary school kid. Arjuna is also a loner because he has his own world. Japanese culture is his comfort zone. The myth is that Arjuna is a genius.

#### 6. Li Yanjie

The next character is Li Yanjie with his Indonesian name Arya Adjie Liedarto. He is an OSN mentor, Physics Team.



Picture.7 Li Yanjie or Arya Adjie Liedarto

The denotative meaning in the picture above is that Li Yanjie has white skin, blonde and bangs, pointed chin and wears a pierced ear. Li Yanjie or Laoshi, who is usually familiar with his students, is of Chinese descent. Laoshi means teacher in Mandarin. Li Yanjie in the dialogue balloon (right panel) introduced himself as Li Yanjie and called his Indonesian name an alias, or another name. In the left panel, Li Yanjie started coloring his hair blonde and wearing piercings. In the dialogue balloon Yanjie says that he is imitating his adoptive brother who is a Korean by using the term *mimicry batesan* and *mullerian*, which basically means his style is now only to scare people but he hopes that he is really strong like his brother.

The connotative meaning is Yanjie, who is Chinese descent, also describes genius and gets discrimination in this comic. In terms of appearance Yanjie who has an oriental face is also stylish like boyband. Yanjie even paint her hair and use piercings in the style of a South Korean boyband. Yanjie do not have the spirit of nationalism towards the Indonesian people. Unlike Dirga, Yanjie prefers his Chinese name rather than his Indonesian name, which means that for Yanjie Indonesia is no longer number one. He is more comfortable using his mandarin name than his Indonesian name, it is also because he is no longer an Indonesian citizen. The myth is that the Chinese are smart, handsome in the style of a Korean boyband and marginalized and increasingly confirmed that the Chinese are smart in science.

## 7. Zam Ghufroni

The seventh character is Zam Ghufroni who is also an OSN mentor for the Physics Team. He is a Malay man of Arab descent and a religious person.



Picture.8 Zam Ghufron

The denotative meaning in the picture above is that Zam is the mentor of the physics OSN team from Binusvi High School, because of the policy that the winning school has the right to bring the mentor into the team. Zam and Yanjie became mentors to the physics team. Zam is a Malay person whose Arab descent has beard. He has a tall and muscular posture. The connotative meaning is that Malays mixed with Arabs have darker



faces than ethnic Chinese but are more muscular than ethnic Chinese. The myth is that mixed Malay Arabs are more masculine than Chinese.

## 8. Park Hyunbin

The next character is Park Hyunbin. He is Li Yanjie's adoptive brother. Park Hyunbin is a native of South Korea and a CEO of a technology company in South Korea.



Picture.9. Park Hyunbin

The denotative meaning in Park Hyunbin's picture above in the picture on the right side of panel one and two is Li Yanjie's conversation with Hyunbin when Hyunbin just finished helping Yanjie while on Bully at school, Hyunbin tells that he is born to a rich family with many enemies. When he is young he often kidnapped and hyunbin fight, burns on his body is one proof of his resistance. In the third panel, when Hyunbin and Yanjie are still in high school in Taiwan, they are brothers since Yanjie's family and Yanjie himself agreed to become the adopted children of Hyunbin's family. Hyunbin asks Yanjie to call him *Gege* (meaning brother in mandarin) or *Abang* (meaning brother in Indonesian), Hyunbin is learning Indonesian. The last panel on the left is when Hyunbin is introduced to the OSN physics team participants by Yanjie. Hyunbin came to Pekanbaru to pick up Yanjie and instead stayed during the OSN quarantine.

The meaning of the connotation is the relationship between China and South Korea which is closely allied with the relationship between Hyunbin and Yanjie. Hyunbin's and Yanjie's relationship is like representing their country. The culture of South Korea is currently loved by the world, one of which is China. Like Hyunbin who is in control of Yanjie as his brother and boss. The myth is cultural diversity. Hyunbin's character adds diversity in character both in narration and characterization.

## 9. Interaction between Dirga and Reihan

In addition to ethnic or racial diversity, in webtoon 304th Study Room (season 1) it also elevates the diversity of backgrounds of characters of different faiths or religions. In the webtoon the characters also use religious symbols such as crosses, koko clothes and veils. The following picture and analysis;



multicultural society. Multiculturalism is an understanding that values many cultures. The tolerance attitude shown by Yanjie is in line with multicultural values.

#### 11. The current condition of Indonesian

The current depiction of Indonesian society can also be seen through the perspective of Yanjie's character. Yanjie with his family who are one of the victims of the May 1998 tragedy, when there is racial riots against ethnic Chinese, during the incident Yanjie and his family leave Indonesia to Taiwan while his sister is the victim of the tragedy. This can be seen in the following panels;



Picture.12 The current condition of the Indonesian in the webtoon

The denotative meaning in some of the panels above is Yanjie's point of view of the current Indonesian society in the 304th Study Room webtoon (season 1). According to Yanjie, Indonesian society has changed and is different from 1998. There is no more riots, there are no separators of skin color and trust. All peaceful side by side, especially young people, students. With the icons of students from elementary, middle and high school and college students (right panel). There are some women who use a veil, darker and brighter skin (second panel). While in the third panel young people are embracing each other. Yanjie further told her mother that there are still a few people who are not good.

The meaning of the connotation is that the Indonesian people adhere to the principle of *Bhineka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), which means that the Indonesian people, although different, remain one. In the process of interaction there are no efforts to marginalize other ethnic or religious groups. All are in equal position. This clearly supports the spirit of multiculturalism. The myth is that Indonesian society is a plural multicultural nation. The nation of Indonesia is a pluralistic nation because it comes from diverse backgrounds. The Indonesian nation is a multicultural nation because its people with different backgrounds support and unite.

#### 12. Racist People

People who are not good according to Yanjie in a conversation with their mother in the analysis above are individuals in the Binusvi school who revoked scholarships for disadvantaged students and different ethnic groups with them, the people are the majority ethnic group. This can be seen in the following comic strip;



Picture.13 Conversation Frauding that occurred in Binusvi

Aside from the Binusvi people, the OSN committee also sabotaged the intention of aborting participants from disadvantaged families and personal problems with the head of the committee's daughter. They even fired Li Yanjie as a mentor, such as the conversation between Mr. Zam and Wan Raja who is the head of the committee OSN, Riau Province



Picture.14 Li Yanjie's Dismissal Conversation

In denotative meaning, it can be seen the fact that in Indonesian society today there is still discrimination against the weak, namely students who are disadvantaged and in ethnic minorities. In picture 13 (first panel) while having breakfast, Bejo talked about his concern about the Dirga scholarship and would be revoked like Laoshi Yanjie despite getting gold in OSN. In the two to five panels, Mr. Zam explained that this could happen because Binusvi, like the headmaster, intentionally revoked scholarships from 'non-native' students. While in picture 14 is Mr. Zam's conversation with the head of the committee OSN, Wan Raja. Mr. Zam does not accept the OSN committee's treatment of Li Yanjie who is fired for arguing for administrative reasons because he is not an Indonesian citizen. Wan Raja even called Yanjie a traitor for giving up his citizenship. The meaning of the connotation is that there is no tolerance. In the process of interaction, it is clear that efforts to marginalize certain ethnic groups and community groups. The myth is that the majority and those who have power tend to act discriminatively against minorities and the weak.

It can be concluded that the myth in the 304th study room webtoon is largely cultural diversity. The myth of Dirga's character to Zam shows the characteristics of characters that vary in terms of their visual appearance and the background of the characters' lives, which is a form of diversity itself. These myths show Felia Huang's ideological struggle. Felicia who is of Chinese descent who has experienced discrimination tries to show criticisms and provide solutions through multiculturalis

## Conclusion

The results of the study show that the representation of multicultural society in the webtoon is portrayed through characters and backgrounds of different ethnic / racial and

religious characters and how the characters interact. Myths found using the analysis of the level of meaning semiotic Barthes shows the webtoonist ideological struggle. The ideology that Felicia wants to convey is a multicultural society. So it can be said that digital comic or webtoon play an important role as a products of popular culture to instilling or perpetuating ideology, especially Pancasila multicultural society in Indonesia.

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